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LITTLE PLAYS

FROM INDIAN HISTORY

E. L. TURNBULL



FIRST SERIES

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DRAMATIC DIALOGUE READERS

LITTLE PLAYS

FROM INDIAN HISTORY

FIRST SERIES

Scenes from the lives of
SAMUDRAGUPTA, MIRABAI
SHER SHAH AND SHIVAJI

BY

E. L. TURNBULL



GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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The narrative introductions to these scenes from Indian history are as accurate historically as reference to reliable authorities can make them.

The Dramatic Readings however do not claim to keep close to any actual historic events, but are merely suggested by them, and by traditional stories that have come down through the centuries.

Minor characters are sometimes quite imaginary, appearing in a way that they might have been supposed to do, given time and place.

In certain of these scenes, costume is described, and may be safely followed if the scenes are presented on a stage.

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PREFACE

ONE of the most promising educational features of today is the increasing use which is being made of the dramatic method in the teaching of subjects such as language and history. The experience of teachers who have employed this method, of which so little use has been made till quite recently, has convinced them of its unique advantages. All young people have a natural liking for 'make believe', and a subject such as history becomes far more vivid and intelligible when they can, in some degree, play the parts of the actors themselves instead of reading about them in the third person. Not only is the scene realized more vividly but the readers gain quicker insight into various types of character, and learn, almost instinctively, to put themselves into the place of others. In actual life such a faculty is of priceless assistance; if we all possessed it and used it, many of the difficulties of the world would be less serious than they are.

It is, of course, only one side of history that can be presented in dramatic form, but it is the side which appeals and is best suited to young minds, and it forms the basis—the natural foundation—for more advanced historical study.

But it is not only in making a subject such as history more vivid and attractive that the dramatic method is superior: teachers who have used it agree that it facilitates the learning of a foreign language, and that in particular, the difficulties of English pronunciation becomes less formidable. The help of a teacher is, of course, indispensable, but words when correctly pronounced in dramatic readings become more readily part of the pupil's vocabulary than when they are learned in the course of narrative or description.

Preface

It is hoped therefore that these little books may prove useful to Indian pupils not only in history but also in English.

It will be noted that some of the scenes are of a domestic or semi-domestic nature. In the case of some of the greater figures in Indian history, such as Babur* or Chand Bibi,* the domestic side of their lives is by no means the least attractive. These scenes may remind the readers that war, administration and intrigue were not the sole occupations of the great, and may perhaps lead them to compare social conditions of the past with those of the present day.

In the language employed in these scenes the aim has been a simple conversational idiom, which aims at the golden mean between what is too 'literary' and what is too aggressively modern.

To make Rana Pratap Singh, for instance, speak in old-fashioned or archaic English would be to mislead the pupil; but each period had its own atmosphere which cannot be conveyed by the slang of today. For the purpose of such scenes as these the ideal medium obviously lies between the two extremes.

In the actual use of the book in class it is recommended that the teacher should read the stage-directions; he might with advantage introduce each play by a prefatory talk about the period and the situation. It is hoped too that pupils will be encouraged to learn and act the scenes.

* In the Second Series.

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MIRABAI

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF SAMUDRAGUPTA

Early in the fourth century, Chandragupta, a raja in Magadha, married Kumara Devi, a princess of the Lichchavi clan which had been famous in the time of Buddha, and of which the religious leader Mahavira was a member.

His illustrious marriage brought Chandragupta such a marked increase of power that he eventually ruled over Oudh as well as Magadha and along the Ganges as far as Allahabad, then known as Prayag.

He established a new era, the Gupta, and with his dynasty began the great period known to history as 'The Golden Age of India'.

As a tribute to Kumara Devi and her race, he caused gold coins to be struck in the joint names of his queen, himself and the Lichchavi nation.

The son of this auspicious union was Samudragupta, one of the most splendid kings India has ever known. On the death of his father, he succeeded to the Gupta inheritance, and lost no time in extending his empire. He first subjugated the rajas of the north, and then marched south through Chota Nagpur, and into the valley of the Mahanadi. Here he conquered the kingdom of South Kosala, after which he proceeded to subdue the forest tribes of Orissa and the Central Provinces. Pushing on further southwards Samudragupta vanquished the rulers of all the countries that lay between the mouth of the Godavari and Conjeevaram, to the south-west of Madras. He returned to his northern dominions through the western parts of the Deccan, adding to his conquests the Maratha country and Khandesh. The difficulties of this triumphant campaign must have been many, since it entailed marching

through several thousand miles of rough and difficult country.

Samudragupta was now fully justified in considering himself as the Lord Paramount of India, a King of Kings and Ruler of Princes. Having established his supremacy and consolidated his empire, he spent the rest of his long life in the administration of his dominions and in the arts of peace.

An accomplished poet and musician, he is said to have played the flute with great skill. His court was the centre of all that was most brilliant in the culture of India. Perhaps the summit of his ambitions was attained when he revived the *Ashwamedha* or Horse Sacrifice, which he celebrated in the manner of the heroes of the *Mahabharata*.

He reigned for fifty years and was succeeded by another great Gupta king, Vikramaditya, Sun of Power.

SCENE I

A PRINCE OF THE GOLDEN AGE

A room in the royal palace of Pataliputra, KUMARA DEVI, the queen of Chandragupta, is reclining on a low couch. She is dressed in a robe of soft silk, belted high, and wears a long necklace of gold and uncut emeralds. Around her, maidens of high rank are sitting in attendance. One, her favourite SUNDARI, is gently stroking the feet of the queen. VATSIKA, an older girl, holds a casket containing Kumara Devi's new jewels. NARMADA and GANDHARA hold the queen's mirror and combs. The room is hung with rich curtains and panels of silk embroidered with scenes from the legends of the Indian heroes. A group of female MUSICIANS sit on the floor awaiting

a signal to begin. One, a charming young flute-player, touches her strings lightly.

KUMARA DEVI: Peace, little music-maker. We are still busy looking at the jewels. I like the triple row of pearls, Vatsika. From where did this necklace come?

VATSIKA: The court jeweller swears 'tis from the far south, the land of monkeys.

KUMARA DEVI: Ignorant one! King and men live there—not such as in the kingdom of my lord, but certainly kings and men of a kind. The queens of those petty rulers perhaps wear pearls. I wonder then, should I do so?

NARMADA (*tactfully*): Only the largest and the best would be sent for you to wear, O Queen of Queens.

KUMARA DEVI: True. Those sapphires from Ceylon and the Golconda diamonds were said to be the first in the world. His Majesty remarked that their cost would build a city. Well, I do not wear them every day. I want a chain, some bracelets and a girdle, a ring or two. That rope of pearls will look well with my azure robe.

VATSIKA: There is a lovely bracelet here, small enough even for your royal wrist, lady.

KUMARA DEVI (*raising herself on her elbow*): 'Tis sweet, those tiny stones, worked to look just like flowers. I'll wear it now (*extends her arm for Vatsika to slip on the bracelet*). And now put the casket away, and we will have some music. No, wait; send for the Prince, and let him bring his flute, but not his music-master. The poor old man goes out of tune.

SUNDARI (*pertly*): Like this (*imitating the nasal tuneless notes of an old man*). Ha-u, ha-u, ha-u-jya jya (*bursts out laughing*).

KUMARA DEVI: You are a naughty child. You should be slapped, Sundari. You cannot sing a note

yourself. My son is very tuneful. Only today I hear he has composed a song to Krishna.

GANDHARA : Both words and music ? He is wonderful.

KUMARA DEVI : And skilled with sword and bow too. The Master-at-Arms told His Majesty that he had nothing more to teach the prince.

SUNDARI (softly) : And so beautiful ! I doubt if Rama himself looked more of a hero than our young lord.

KUMARA DEVI : Hush ! here he comes, his pages with him. Tell the boys to remain outside. They chatter so.

Enter SAMUDRAGUPTA. He is about eight years old, tall and strong for his age. He is dressed in a short tunic, is bare-headed, and carries a small flute. He makes a low obeisance to the queen.

THE MAIDENS : Greeting to our prince !

SAMUDRAGUPTA : And to all here.

KUMARA DEVI : Is that a new flute, my son ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : I've had it since this morning. It was brought by an old chanter from the hills. He did not want to sell it. My pages offered first a piece of gold and then two more.

KUMARA DEVI : Who gave them leave to scatter gold ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : The coins were mine. He would not take them, but suddenly thrust the flute into my hands and said, ' Play, and if the sound is sweet, the flute is yours '.

KUMARA DEVI : And did you play ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : Yes.

KUMARA DEVI : What music ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : That little song you taught me, the one my father loves to hear.

KUMARA DEVI (smiling) : The old Lichchavi air ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : Yes, about a warrior and his return home.

KUMARA DEVI : And did the old musician like your song ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : I think so ; and it was strange, for he cried out : 'The flute is yours. That is a song of my own land. The song of eight hundred years gone by, when the great Buddha walked on earth.'

KUMARA DEVI (*proudly*) : We were ruling then in the land of the Vrijjis. Mahavira the saint and teacher sprang from our race. We have great names with which to decorate the past, my son.

SAMUDRAGUPTA (*simply*) : I shall be great, and those that reign after me.

KUMARA DEVI : If God so wills. That is a pretty flute. I hope you will sing to me.

SAMUDRAGUPTA : The Lichchavi warrior's song ?

KUMARA DEVI : I have heard that so often. Have you nothing that your musician-master taught you ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : There was a verse all about rivers. I learned ten of them. (*Chants.*)

'Attend to this my song of praise, O Ganga,
Yamuna, Sarasvati, Sutudri, Parushni,
Together with Asikni, O Marudvridha, and with—'

KUMARA DEVI (*putting her hands over her ears amid the laughter of the maidens and the musicians*) : Stop ! Are there any more rivers in Hindustan ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : Indeed there are. (*Chants again.*)

'Vitasta, O Arjkiya, listen with Sushoma.'

KUMARA DEVI : I won't listen to one more.

SAMUDRAGUPTA : There are nine more ; and what is more, I know where they all are, except Marudvridha, and I am going to find *that* out on one of my conquests.

KUMARA DEVI : One of your what ?

SUNDARI : The prince is thinking of the time when all the kings of India shall bow down to him.

SAMUDRAGUPTA : Yes, that is it. East, west, north, south.

GANDHARA : My lord, the south is the land of demons.

SAMUDRAGUPTA : Who cares ? Besides, how do you know, Gandhara ? I heard my father say that there is a king who lives in the jungle. He is called the 'Tiger King'. I would like to challenge him, and make him my vassal.

KUMARA DEVI : And what would you challenge him with ? Your new flute ? My son, your father's kingdom is very vast. If you rule it well and wisely you will have enough to do.

SAMUDRAGUPTA (*in a vexed voice*) : Now, mother, could a king of the Gupta line stay at home and just rule, at least when he was young ? When I am quite an old man I shall stop fighting and give a great deal of money to the priests and the poor.

SUNDARI : My lord, you will never be old.

SAMUDRAGUPTA : Perhaps not. But in any case I want to ride out with my army. And I want very much to see the south and the Tiger King.

GANDHARA : It is another Rama who speaks.

SAMUDRAGUPTA (*excitedly*) : And, mother, there is one more great thing I'm going to do.

NARMADA : Only listen to the Sun of Power !

KUMARA DEVI (*gravely*) : And what is that great thing, my son ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA (*a little uncertain how his boast will be taken*) : I'm going to do something Rama did.

GANDHARA : I said the prince was another Rama.

SAMUDRAGUPTA : I am going to celebrate the *Ashwamedha* (*he pauses, abashed himself*).

KUMARA DEVI (*fearfully*) : My dearest son, beware of arrogance. You are still only a little boy, and though I am so glad that you are brave and strong, such great talk as that of the *Ashwamedha*, does not come well from

you. (*Samudragupta hangs his head, his little flute held against his breast.*)

SUNDARI (*earnestly*): Dear Queen, the prince is not vain. The Gods put the words into his mouth. He only spoke as they would have him speak.

SAMUDRAGUPTA: I did, I really did. Words come to me, and I see pictures of future glory.

KUMARA DEVI: The saintly preacher Mahavira said just this: 'Do your duty.' A pious man will do nothing to hurt another person—that is the true meaning of *ahimsa*.

SAMUDRAGUPTA: There are so many things to remember.

KUMARA DEVI: I know. Duty, fidelity, pity and all the good feelings of the heart, these are part of every faith, and the greatest conquest any king can make is of himself, for he is no true sovereign who lives only for his own pleasure and vain glory.

SAMUDRAGUPTA: I was not going to harm the Tiger King, only challenge him. I will try to please you, mother, and to do my duty. And now may I play upon my little flute while the musicians accompany me?

The maidens group round the queen's couch, while Samudragupta waits for the opening strains of the accompaniment. Kumara Devi watches her son's face with an expression of happy love.

SCENE II

THE CONQUEST OF THE FOREST

EPISODE I

A forest settlement overlooking the Mahanadi river. The huts, which are made of grass and leaves, are surrounded by a thicket of thorns and bamboo. Each hut has its own compound, in which grow fruit trees

and vegetables. Nearer to the river are some rice fields by which scaffolds with platforms are built, where cultivators watching their crops may sleep at night, safe from wild beasts. Down by the rice fields a group of WOMEN are chatting, their baskets on their heads. Flocks of twittering sparrows descend among the ripening grain and are pursued by children armed with twigs smeared with some sticky substance. Among these children are two boys and a girl who seem of much higher rank than the rest. The Boys, KUNTALA and MAHENDRA, wear light tunics of deerskin, while each has a gold ear-ring set with a large crystal drop. Round their necks are hung chains made of lumps of gold and tigers' claws. Their hair is dressed in a crest above their foreheads and decorated with the wing of a green parrot. The girl SITA, wears a sari of rich purple silk, while bracelets of gold and anklets laden with coins tinkle as she moves. Her hair, long and curly, is twined with wild berries. The rest of the bird-snarers wear ragged loincloths, while their matted hair hangs round their sun-baked faces. From the rice fields the great camp of Samudragupta can be seen pitched upon the opposite bank of the river.

1ST WOMAN: Good times have come with the King from the North. I now get twice the price for everything I sell inside the camp. Long may Samudragupta Raja rule over the forest!

2ND WOMAN: You would not say so if you'd lost a son by an arrow shot from yonder camp.

1ST WOMAN: I have no sons. Once I wept because the gods sent girls. Good offerings I made too. Flesh and fruit upon the altars, but 'twas all the same, and every child that came, a daughter. Well might I weep.

2ND WOMAN: We always weep for something. I, that my boy is dead. Never again shall I hear his voice

urging on the oxen, singing at the well or even scolding me because I would not let him leave the village and wander in the world beyond ! I said : ' 'Tis all the same, my son, river and trees and villages like ours.'

1ST WOMAN : Of course, and what else should there be ?

2ND WOMAN : He said : ' Mother, I've heard that this great king, Samudragupta, lives in a palace of stone, and drinks from golden goblets and eats off a golden plate. And fifty slaves wait on his smallest wish. And to the court of this great king come men from far-off lands, not walking or even riding horses, but in queer things called ships, that rest upon the water even as our houses rest on the firm ground.'

1ST WOMAN : Had he not seen the fishing boats and rafts upon the river ?

2ND WOMAN : I know not what he thought or saw. I grew quite angry when he said : ' And I should like to serve this king ; carry his armour, burnish his great sword, stand guard upon his threshold ; and if need be, die for him.'

1ST WOMAN : All that was dangerous talk, as if his mind was clouded. The medicine-man should have been asked to mix some strong charm for your boy.

2ND WOMAN : Ah well ! One of his wishes came true. He died for this great king. He stole into the camp just to see, if only once, the face of Samudragupta. 'Twas dark, they thought some wild beast prowled around the royal pavilion. Then the swift arrow ! My poor boy, sixteen years old. Be glad you've only girls, friend.

MAHENDRA (*rushing past, twig in hand, after a distressed sparrow*) : I'll have it. That's my bird, a fine fat one and a greedy wretch stuffed full of grain.

1ST WOMAN : Ha ! my little Raja, what would the

Tiger King say if he knew that his son was snaring sparrows with the forest-log ?

MAHENDRA : What would the raja say ? Why, nothing of course. My father never says ; he *does*.

1ST WOMAN : And what would the raja do ?

MAHENDRA (*frankly*) : Break my sword on his knee and hurl the pieces at me, and I should know that he did not think me worthy to carry it, having disobeyed.

(*Laughs*) : Ah, but I've hidden my sword and told my servant to conceal my absence. (*Suddenly haughtily*) But, Buddhi, what is this to you ? Go sell your fruit to the soldiers from the north and do not meddle in the affairs of kings.

SITA (*coming up shyly*) : What was she saying, brother ? That she would tell old nurse ?

MAHENDRA : No, no, the raja.

SITA : That's not so bad. My father is so gentle. I cannot think why they ever called him 'Tiger Raja'.

KUNTALA (*who has caught three sparrows and is bumptious*) : Can't you, Sita ? Well, I'll tell you. Our father is the Chief of all the forest kings.

SITA : In all the world ?

KUNTALA : Of course. They all bow down to him and some day they will do the same to me. And I shall smite them as they kneel, like this ! (*Bangs his twig. The sparrows manage to flutter away.*)

MAHENDRA (*laughing scornfully*) : There go your subject-kings.

Kuntala darts after the birds, who half fly, half run through the grass. Mahendra, excited by the chase, follows his brother. Sita, catching up her sari, her hair flying, her anklets tinkling, tries to keep up with the boys. The birds, flying more strongly, keep well ahead with the children after them, until the field suddenly ends in forest. From some tall trees a flock of parrots rise screaming.

SITA (*clapping her hands*): Oh, if I could have a parrot of my own.

KUNTALA (*pretending to draw a bow, and shoot at the parrots*): Girls do not decorate their heads with parrot's wings. Only hunters do that. Ping! now if that had been an arrow you could have had your parrot.

SITA: I do not want it dead, or to wear its feathers. I'd like to keep it as a pet.

MAHENDRA (*looking round him*): We've never been so far before. Isn't it nice here? These shady trees, with creepers like long green chains hanging down; and this soft grass.

SITA: And oh, the flowers! Now I shall pick a bunch and take them back to mother. She has been sad since that great camp was placed upon the bank across the river.

KUNTALA: I hope she'll smile again quite soon, for I've a splendid secret.

MAHENDRA: What's that?

KUNTALA: Now if I told you it would no longer be a secret. Look out for snakes in that tall tufty grass.

SITA: Oh! how you frightened me. (*The children run on. A deer springs out of the brushwood*) Look!

MAHENDRA (*with vexation*): Why haven't I a bow? This silly twig (*throws it from him towards the deer which rushes past them*).

SITA: Why do you want to kill things?

MAHENDRA: Girls are so silly. How could men be brave if they were always feeling sorry for something? One of the chiefs told my father that when Samudragupta Raja was only eight years old he hunted with the king his father and was afraid of nothing.

KUNTALA (*throwing out his chest*): Nor am I. (*There is a rustle in the bushes near them*) Stop, what is that?

MAHENDRA: Brave Kuntala go and see.

SITA : Don't tease him Mahendra. I am hungry : it must be long past our food time. How far we've come along the forest track ! We must go back. (*The sound of a flute being played very skilfully somewhere nearby reaches them.*) Is that a bird, or perhaps a forest god ! Should we go blind if we saw his face ?

MAHENDRA (*troubled*) : We could make offerings to appease him.

KUNTALA (*regretfully*) : My sparrows have flown away.

SITA : I have the flowers I picked for mother. They are fresh and smell sweet. I'll weave them into a necklace for the god.

The notes of the flute seem very near. The three children, taking hands, steal along the path which is overhung by trailing creepers, heavy with scented blossoms.

KUNTALA (*fearfully*) : This is a magic spot. Look ! where is the sun ? Hidden away by all this greenery. No sound except the flute. Let us turn back and run towards things we know.

MAHENDRA : Turn back ! I will not. Sita, walk behind me. You will be safer so. I am the son of Tiger Raja whom all the forest chiefs obey. 'Tis true I am not armed.

SITA : What use would a sword be, drawn against a god ? He will be pleased, when he sees that I bring him flowers—what do the chiefs call it ?—tribute—such as they pay to the king from the north, carrying gifts of fruit, honey and all good things that grow wild. How sweet the flute sounds ! Only a kindly god could make such music. I am no longer afraid.

(Runs forward and peeps through the bushes. She beckons to the two boys, who also go forward.)

MAHENDRA (*breathlessly*) : What do you see ? ...

SITA : It is (her voice falls to a whisper) just what we thought !

KUNTALA (clasping his hands): The— !

MAHENDRA (placing his hand over his brother's mouth): Hush, do not speak it.

EPISODE 2

SITA, KUNTALA and MAHENDRA quietly push aside the bushes through which they were peeping at the end of Episode 1, and then fall back a little. Sita draws her sari across her face until only her bright eyes show above its folds. They stand as still as little figures of stone gazing at the FLUTE-PLAYER who leans against the trunk of a tree and, with an expression of dreamy joy, makes his sweet music. He is dressed in a tunic of shining white silk ; from his neck hangs a rope of pearls ; a single jewel shines in his ear. His hair is combed high above his broad forehead in a shining knot and a bunch of mogra blossoms adorns it. The sunshine, softened by the trailing greenery of the wild creepers, seems to bathe the flute-player in a blue light. To the enchanted children he looks a god-like figure ; wonderful and kind. Beside him crouches the little deer that the children had startled when they entered the forest. Suddenly the flute-player becomes aware of the bright eyes watching him. He stops and beckons to them with a charming smile. They advance very shyly.

FLUTE-PLAYER : Why, Sita, is it really you ?

SITA (surprised): Yes, I am Sita, but how did you know my name, my lord ?

FLUTE-PLAYER : What other lovely lady would be wandering in the forest ? (To Mahendra) And are you Rama ? (To Kuntala) And are you Lakshman ?

MAHENDRA (frankly): Sire, I am Mahendra, the

eldest son of Vijayra, the Tiger King, and this is Kuntala his second son. The girl is Sita, and his daughter. My lord ! do we great wrong to look at you ?

FLUTE-PLAYER : By no means ! Why should you ?

KUNTALA : Because of whom you are. We have no offerings. My sparrows flew away.

SITA : The forest flowers are all for you. Shall I begin to weave a necklace for my lord ?

FLUTE-PLAYER (*as if speaking to himself*) : Once, long ago, the great and good Asoka was in some former birth a little child. And with his small companions he played in the village street, and out of the dust he found there made some mud castles. These were his great joy, and back on his dusty heels he rested and admired his work. Then down the street, in faded robes of yellow, came an old man, with a begging bowl in his hand. To give was far more blessed than to receive, and so the people ran to fill the bowl with what they could afford. Only the little boy had nothing. His bosom heaved with grief. Tears of shame burned his eyes and fell down his cheeks. He among all his freinds had no offering to put into the bowl. There were his castles, fashioned with loving care, and though made out of dust, treasures to him. He picked one up and crushed it hard in his little hand, then thrust it into the beggar's bowl. Nor did he know that he of the yellow robe was the great Buddha walking once more on earth. Then spoke the holy sage, 'This child, who from the depths of his benevolence has given the best he has, will some day rule as a great king of India' ; and so passed on.

SITA : My lord, and may we know who you may be so that we can behave with proper reverence ?

FLUTE-PLAYER (*gaily*) : I am no holy sage, but just a music-maker. I come from the far north. My name is Samudragupta.

MAHENDRA (*guessing the truth*): It is the King of Kings.

He falls on his knees and touches the ground with his forehead. Kuntala does the same, while Sita, casting her blossoms at the king's feet, turns to fly through the bushes.

SAMUDRAGUPTA (*with tender amusement*): Why do you run away, fair Sita? You who have brought me flowers sweeter than all the tribute of the forest kings? (*Sita turns, her fears soothed by the kind tones of the king.*) When I was just about Kuntala's age, I boasted that when I was king, I would march to the south, and, proud in power, I would make the forest kings pay tribute. And all this came about; with fruit and flowers the chiefs bowed down before me: but weary of things that I had once desired, I stole away, played truant from the camp, and as when a little boy I'd played being a man, I grown to manhood called up the heart of a boy. This little flute, given me years ago by an old minstrel who came to my father's court, seemed far more precious to me than all the wealth of kings. I sought the forest, followed by my companion, the little deer. And as I played an ancient Lichchavi air, taught me long, long ago by my mother, I quite forgot I ruled a spacious empire or planned to make it bigger. Soon I must go back to the camp, ride to the west with my great army, trample the growing crops, and bring great desolation into the hearts and homes of simple people. Thus are great empires made.

SITA (*gently*): My lord, the crops will soon be gathered in. No need for you to trample them upon the way.

SAMUDRAGUPTA: How like a woman! Always a way round. Well, for an hour or two I have forgotten that I was born a king.

SITA: But you are good, and play so sweetly on your

flute that if I were a bird I'd sit above you on a branch and listen all day long.

There is a flourish of trumpets and the sound of men's voices coming from the direction of the river. King Samudragupta places his little flute in the bosom of his tunic with a wistful smile.

SAMUDRAGUPTA : My little hour of joys is over. I must go back and wear the awful frown of royalty. (To Sita) But, little maid, if you should ever think of me, let it be just as a good companion, whose flute mingled its notes with the simple song of birds. Some day, when you have grown to noble womanhood, from my rich store I'll send you a rare gem that any queen might covet, and this in memory of your gift of fresh-picked flowers. And when my bones are dust, and the red rust stains my sword, let the world remember that in the conquest of the forest, my only weapon was a little flute.

MAHENDRA : Majesty, may we be your bowmen ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : My lords, you may be my bowmen.

KUNTALA : And destroy your enemies ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : Nay, protect my friends.

SITA : Majesty, may I be your necklace-maker ?

SAMUDRAGUPTA : No other shall so serve me.

The three children kneel before him. Very lightly he places his hands on their bent heads, then with a gesture of farewell, slips through the bushes, leaving the kneeling children watching his departure with rapt and wondering eyes.

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF SAINT MIRABAI

Mirabai, the Hindu Poetess, who lived in the sixteenth century, is still held in the memory of India as a saint.

A princess of Marwar, her life story is a sad one. Her father, Ratan Singh of Merta, a Rathor chieftain, fell at the battle of Khanna in 1527. And so Mirabai was born into that atmosphere of glory so often merged into tragedy, which surrounds the history of the Rajputs.

Even as a little child, Mirabai must have awakened to the clash of steel, and the shouts of warriors arming for battle. She must have seen too with her young eyes the smoke of the funeral pyre upon which some devoted wife had uttered her last prayer—that she might meet her hero-lord in paradise. And so it is not strange that this gifted and sensitive child should have sought some outlet from the stern times into which she was born. She found it in the worship of Krishna, to which she gave herself with a mystic intensity not out of keeping with the strong heroic soul of Rajasthan.

That she should be married was of course settled. Her bridegroom was the eldest son of the great Rana Sanga. But although she went through the ceremony, Mirabai was really the spiritual bride of Shri Krishna, or at least so she felt herself to be. Her mother-in-law strongly opposed Mirabai's faith and attempted to force the girl to exchange it for the worship of Durga. But Mirabai refused to give up her devotion to Krishna, and from this time was the object of steady persecution. Even the great Rana Sanga himself sought to dissuade her, but his words, as those of others, fell upon ears deafened to every sound but that of the celestial flute.

Ill tales were spread about the young princess. It was whispered that, when she was supposed to be alone in her room, she could be heard speaking with intense emotion to some other person. She was only pouring out her unhappy heart at the feet of the god in those beautiful poems which the women of India sing today.

The rana, no doubt angered by what he considered defiance of his authority, is said to have sent her a

poisoned draught as *charnamrit*. She knew what the cup contained, but drank it. She did not die. Perhaps her great faith saved her.

A little later her husband Bhojraj died. Her position now, as a Hindu widow, was worse than before. At last, unable to bear her life any longer, she threw off her royal robes and put on those of a beggar. Then she stole down to the river and threw herself in. Again, death forsook her. She was saved by some cowherds, who led her to Brindaban. There she visited every place sacred to the memory of Krishna. There are many other stories about this wonderful woman, and we do not really know where legend ends and real history begins. But these things at least emerge out of the mists of the past, that Mirabai was as good as she was beautiful, and that she handed down the finest Hindi poetry ever written by a woman.

SCENE I

RANA SANGA SENDS FOR MIRABAI

A room in the palace of Rana Sanga. The RANA, a man of middle age but looking older owing to being crippled, is in conversation with the RANI and their son BHOJRAJ. A little apart, JAIMALL, a kinsman of Mirabai, stands in an attitude of anxious attention. He is a young man of heroic aspect and great personal beauty. He is dressed in the manner of the royal Rajputs of the period, but a little more plainly than the rana and Bhojraj, who are members of the ruling house of Mewar Sesodias and princes of Mewar. The rana is evidently perturbed, the rani angry, and Bhojraj sulky.

RANA SANGA : It seems the girl is really set upon this worship of Krishna. Her parents are to blame,

giving her images when most children would have been at play.

RANI (*spitefully*): I always knew that no good would come with a bride taken from Merta. The women of that house are all the same, contrary creatures always wanting something that this world of ours does not provide. Most girls would have been quite content to be the bride of Mewar.

BHOJRAJ: The girl prays far too much.

RANA SANGA (*fairly*): I see no fault in that, so long as she does not shirk her wedded duty, or bring reproach upon the noble name she bears.

RANI (*in triumph*): But that is what she does. Have you no ears to hear, my lord? (To Bhojraj) Or you my son, either?

BHOJRAJ (*pettishly*): I've other things to do than watch my bride, or prowl along the passages listening to women's spiteful tales.

RANI: The girl is always with the priests, or on her knees before that image she brought from Merta. Have you forgotten how on her very wedding day she walked three times around it, as if she were devoted to the service of the temple? 'Twas shocking; my very ears burned hot with shame.

JAIMALL (*coming forward from where he has been standing outside the family group*): Mirabai means no harm. Even as a little child she loved the image as other children love their toys. Hers has not been a happy life.

RANI (*violently*): And what has Mirabai to do with you, young Sir?

JAIMALL (*gently*): I am her cousin.

RANI (*shrilly*): And in league with her and all her nonsense.

RANA SANGA (*irritably*): Peace, woman, your voice

is like a peacock's. Let me think. (To Bhojraj) Have you a just complaint to make of Mirabai?

BHOJRAJ: She spends too long a time at her devotions.

RANA SANGA: Ah! and is that all you have against her?

BHOJRAJ: She scribbles verse, and does not care for things that please me.

RANA SANGA: The girl is disobedient to your wishes?

RANI: She flouts mine openly.

JAIMALL (*earnestly*): Lady, I'm sure that Mirabai is far too gentle to defy you.

RANI (*with a look of hate at Jaimall*): Must this young man be present at our family council, to go away and blurt our secrets to the world?

JAIMALL (*drawing himself up to his full and splendid height*): You do me a grave injustice in such a speech. The honour of my house is now at stake.

RANA SANGA (*irritably*): Withdraw, withdraw, Jaimall. The rani should regret her speech, but she is right. This matter is between us and our son. (*JAIMALL salutes the rana and, with cold and haughty ceremony, the rani, and withdraws.*)

RANI: I'm glad he's gone. I never liked him, or any member of his family. Such airs, as if he was descended from the Sun!

RANA SANGA: His birth excuses pride. He is the bravest of the brave race of Marwar; his place is on my right hand. Also, the boy is loyal, the first of the swords of Maru. But let us speak of Mirabai and her behaviour, which seems outside the bounds of womanly discretion.

RANI: With my own ears I've heard her pour out words of adoration!

RANA SANGA: To whom?

RANI: Ah!

BHOJRAJ (*violently*): 'Tis false.

RANI: I said but one word, my son.

BHOJRAJ: But then you thought great ill of Mirabai.

RANI: One's thoughts come unbidden. The girl has not been seemly, and refused to honour Durga, the goddess of our house.

RANA SANGA: The rani has just cause for anger. I now remember that Mirabai brought with her from her home the image to which she makes her devotions. It will not do to let so young a girl have her own way. Summon her, and I myself will reason with her.

RANI: My lord, you will be firm and not allow her to weaken your decision with childish tears.

RANA SANGA (*contemptuously*): Tears! All women cry for what they want and often cannot have.

BHOJRAJ (*who anticipates a scene for which he has no desire*): I must request permission to depart. I have some business with my armour.

(*He bows, and presents his sword to the Rana, who touches it with a sharp glance at his son, and BHOJRAJ retires.*)

RANA SANGA: I will see the girl at once. (*Claps his hands sharply; a female ATTENDANT appears.*) Send to the quarters of the Princess Mirabai, and say the rana desires her to come swiftly to him. (*The ATTENDANT hurries away.*) How much I hate this business of seeing the girl!

RANI: I hope she comes before you with submission.

RANA SANGA: Oh, she is always very gentle.

RANI: Outside, my lord. The girl is as hard as granite, her mind made up. Did you see Jaimall's face when he departed? The look he gave me was little short of murderous.

RANA SANGA: You tried the lad's temper too much.

RANI: These children have things just as they choose. If I'd defied my husband's mother, I should

have felt her hand heavy upon me, even though my blood was seven times royal. But I was docile, and sought to please. Often I wept myself to sleep.

RANGA SANGA : And yet, no one could say that you lack spirit, or are quite crushed by what she made you suffer.

RANI : The wheel of time goes round. Here comes the girl ; I will retire into an inner chamber, in case her obstinacy makes me cry out in indignation that one should be so bold as to defy my lord.

The RANI disappears through a little door, but does not quite close it. MIRABAI enters followed by her NURSE and an ATTENDANT. The princess makes a low obeisance to the rana, and then stands with bent head and folded hands before him. She is very lovely and about sixteen years old.

RANA SANGA (harshly) : Dismiss your women.

MIRABAI (with a frightened glance) : May not my old nurse stay ?

RANA SANGA : Then let her remain, but tell her to face away from the royal cushion.

Mirabai moves towards where the elder of her attendants is waiting, and placing her hands very lightly on her shoulders turns her round. The other ATTENDANT goes out.

RANA SANGA (sternly) : Princess, ill tales have reached my ears of your behaviour since you became a daughter of our house.

MIRABAI : My lord, what have you heard ?

RANA SANGA : That you defy the rani.

MIRABAI : I've done my best to show a proper meekness.

RANA SANGA : Tush, girl ; you and your proper meekness ! And what about your worship of Krishna, knowing the custom here is to pay full devotion to Durga, the guardian of our strength ?

MIRABAI (*in trembling tones*): One's faith is one's own.

RANA SANGA: What's that? Let me hear no more of this defiance. From this day forth you worship Durga, and put your idol out of sight. I will not be defied, I, Lord of Mewar, you a mere girl? As if you could know what you wanted!

MIRABAI: My lord, if I must cease to worship Krishna, then I shall die!

RANA SANGA (*taken aback*): What, by your own hand?

MIRABAI (*gently*): Oh no, my lord, of grief.

RANA SANGA (*with an impatient sound*): You're sick with too much brooding. Mix with the women, play with the children, until some of your own need all your care. Get some new trinkets; I will order that you may have a necklace of rare stones, some anklets: but refrain from Krishna-worship or there will be no more peace 'twixt you and me.

MIRABAI (*tearing her robe aside and baring her childish throat*): I cannot do your wish, my lord, so kill me. Let your bright sword settle this matter, and my blood wash right away all memory of our quarrel.

RANA SANGA (*to himself, in great perturbation*): The girl is mad, her great eyes seem to burn me. (*To Mirabai*) You are beside yourself. Leave me, but let me hear no more of this defiance. My mind is heavy with the affairs of state. I need no other source of sorrow. Remember you are a Rajputni, and put away this sickly habit. Brace yourself up to be the mother of sons who some great day may hold Chitor against its foes. Now go.

He turns his face away from MIRABAI'S pleading eyes, and she, realizing that his mind is quite made up, bows her head before him and silently goes out of the room. The old NURSE follows her, tears pouring down her wrinkled cheeks.

SCENE II

THE Charnamrit

A room in the apartments assigned to the Princess Mirabai, in the palace of Rana Sanga. Near the window stands SANJOGTA, one of the companions who has followed Mirabai from Merta. Sitting on a low stool is the old NURSE, engaged in threading some gold beads which she takes one by one out of a box by her side on the floor.

NURSE : It grows dark, although not long after noon.

SANJOGTA : The clouds are heavy. There is thunder in the air.

NURSE : That's true enough, inside the palace and out. For three whole days our princess has been captive in these rooms. The rani plans some further mischief to that little saint, whose bosom, pure as a white lotus, holds no evil thought ; indeed she thinks only of her prayers, and that she may be worthy of Lord Krishna.

SANJOGTA : When it was known in Merta that she was the one chosen to be the bride of Sanga's son, my mother slapped me for some childish prank, saying : ' Alas that being a girl you were not born as Mirabai, who goes to Mewar in royal state.' I envied her, and was beside myself with joy when I was chosen, being of distant kin, to follow in her train.

NURSE : And now you're glad that you are just Sanjogta. My wretched child, she whom I nursed from birth and loved more than the son who died, how thorny is the path her little feet have trod to Mewar ! The rani hates her, envies her beauty, is jealous for her son. I hardly dare to give the princess food unless I have prepared it all myself. There's not one servant who will not be rich if harm comes to my darling. She has no friends within the palace but you and me.

SANJOGTA : 'Tis said that the noble Jaimall spoke up for her, even before the rana.

NURSE : And much good that would do ! The rani has no love for those from Marwar, even though the Mertias sit on the right hand of Mewar's lord. Women remember twice two thousand years if need be.

SANJOGTA : What can we do ?

NURSE : Nothing, or I should have done it long ago. I've fallen on my knees and begged the princess by my white hairs to hide her faith, and act as if she had repented.

SANJOGTA : What did she say ?

NURSE : Nothing, but turned round to that image with folded hands, and then, as if in very truth she felt his presence there, said : 'Forgive my old and trusted servant, Lord, if out of love for me she has offended thy holy ears.' I crept away, a sick dread round my heart. Such doings must anger the rana. (*A SERVANT enters, a tall woman bearing a basket of fruit, which she places on the table. As she does so, a sound of singing comes from an inner room.*)

SERVANT : Who sings ?

NURSE (*curtly*) : Our mistress.

SERVANT : To whom ?

NURSE : Herself. The princess is alone.

SERVANT : Strange ! (*Listens*) Is she not speaking to some dear friend ?

NURSE : I've told you, the princess is alone. Come, go about your business, your errand is done.

SERVANT : But it is not. I've a message brought by a relation from Raja Jaimall.

NURSE : I will take it.

SERVANT : My orders were to give it to the Princess Mirabai and no one else.

NURSE : And mine were not to call her from her prayers. (*Puts out her hand*) Give it to me.

SERVANT (*rudely*): I will not. No, not even if you slap me, as you did the other day. The rani heard of it, and called me to her to learn the reason why her servants were insulted by those of the Princess Mirabai.

NURSE: I hope you told her that you being a low-born woman made strife, and that your tongue which wags from morn to night like the tail of a pariah puppy angered me, who am no slave of Mewar. I have no more to say to you.

SERVANT: Then I shall wait until the princess may choose to show herself.

NURSE: Wait till life ends; 'tis all the same to me, so that you cease from speech.

The servant stands with a sullen scowl on her face, but becomes alert as a soft chanting is heard from an inner room. The words, almost as if spoken to another person, are quite clear.

'Mira is the servant of her beloved, the Mountain-Holder. She cares not though the people mock her.'

The song ceases. MIRABAI suddenly appears at the door leading from the inner apartment. Her eyes are bright with mystic fire. She has grown very thin, but looks little more than a child. Her long hair is entwined with flowers. A delicate scent hangs around her.

NURSE (*rising*): My child, we are not alone.

Mirabai turns and sees the servant, who makes her an insolent salutation.

MIRABAI (*with simple dignity*): What does the rani desire of me?

SERVANT: The message is not from Mewar's queen but from your kinsman, Raja Jaimall.

MIRABAI: And what has he to say to me, I who am quite forgotten in a strange land?

SERVANT: That, if you've need of him, to send some token that he will understand.

MIRABAI: 'Tis strange that you, the rani's woman, should bring this message.

SERVANT: Raja Jaimall sits on the right hand of Mewar.

MIRABAI: And yet, I of the same house am little better than a captive.

SERVANT: What answer shall I take?

MIRABAI (*with a rapt smile*): That I having everything, need nothing.

The SERVANT throws a curious look at the princess and goes out.

NURSE: There goes a wicked woman, one who pours all she hears, with much addition, into the rani's ears. No message came from Raja Jaimall; that was a trick to lure some secret out of you, my child.

MIRABAI: I have no secrets, and I sent no answer. Her visit was in vain, and she took nothing to those greedy ears which ache for evil news of me.

NURSE: Oh, bad the day when we set out for Mewar!

MIRABAI: Dear Nurse, our destinies have been written long ago. Our going forth or turning back is of such small account in that great sum set by the gods of which the answer is hidden from us.

NURSE (*half impatiently*): My dear, your talk is far beyond your age. Such wisdom sits badly on you. Come, let me comb your hair and put this necklace on you which I have restrung. Ah, that the day had never passed when first I felt your hands upon my breast and knew you safe! (*Weeps.*)

MIRABAI: My kind one, Mirabai is grateful for those tears. But look at poor Sanjogta there. Soon she will cry too. Must I bring grief on all who love me? I hear that Jaimall, my brave cousin, has faced both exile and disgrace on my account. And why? Because I worship

Krishna, my sweet lord, to whom my mother dedicated me when I was six years old.

NURSE: Hush! Your mother slipped in speech, that's all, when saying, 'See thy bridegroom'.

MIRABAI (*gently*): You do not understand. My mother knew my needs.

NURSE (*wringing her hands*): Ah, what will be the end of this sad business?

MIRABAI (*with a tranquil smile*): Who knows the end of anything until it comes?

There is a sound of voices in the passage outside; almost an altercation is taking place between the guards and some women. Sanjogta runs to the door and pulls aside the heavy purdah. She turns her face, full of terror, towards the princess as two female ATTENDANTS enter, carrying a tray on which stands a magnificent golden goblet.

1ST ATTENDANT: The Rana Sanga, Lord of Mewar, sends to Princess Mirabai the Charnamrit.

The nurse screams, and throws herself between the attendants and the princess.

NURSE (*frantically*): She shall not drink, the princess shall not drink, out of the rana's cup!

MIRABAI (*moving forward*): Peace, Nurse. The rana honours me. (*Sanjogta bursts into noisy sobs.*) Lead that poor child away.

SANJOGTA (*rushing forward*): No, I will drink the contents of the cup.

MIRABAI (*with stern meaning*): Only royalty may support the burden of royalty. (*To the attendants*) Give me the cup!

The attendants move forward and present the tray to the princess. She lifts the great cup and, holding it in both hands, advances until she stands in the very centre of the great room. The nurse has fallen on her knees, her hands raised in an attitude of supplication.

Sanjogta stands as if turned to marble. The two attendants are motionless. Mirabai slowly raises the great cup and as a token of humility places it upon her head, and then brings it down to the level of her lips.

NURSE (in agony): No! No! do not drink.

MIRABAI: I would meet death with courage as a child of the house of Merta should.

She puts her lips to the rim of the cup and slowly tilts it, until she has drained its contents. Then she holds it out in front of her, swaying a little, awaiting her doom.

SANJOGTA (almost hysterical): A miracle, a miracle!

NURSE: Her sweet blood is so pure that Death, who lurked inside the cup, has slunk away ashamed.

MIRABAI (still holding the cup, and chanting with mystic fervour).

‘Kanh have I bought; the price he asked I paid:

Some cry, “Too great,” while others jeer, “’Twas small”:

I paid in full, weighed to the utmost grain,
My love, my life, my self, my soul, my all.’

She sets down the cup, and without looking at anyone walks across the room and disappears behind the purdah which conceals the door of her shrine.

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF SHER SHAH

Sher Shah, one of the most remarkable men in the history of India, defeated the Emperor Humayun at Chausa, on the banks of the Ganges. Humayun, who was forced to fly for his life, was obliged to leave the Empress Haji Begum and other Mogul ladies at the mercy of the Afghans. Sher Shah, however, treated them with marked courtesy and returned them safely

to their own people. Unfortunately, before he could intervene, several had disappeared and no trace of them was ever found.

After Sher Shah had ascended the throne of Delhi, he sought to conquer the Rajputs and marched into Malwa. Here Bairam Khan, Humayun's celebrated general, was delivered up to him. Bairam Khan's escape to join his master was a source of great annoyance to Sher Shah, who had hoped to attach the distinguished soldier to his own cause.

Sher Shah was killed in 1545, while directing the siege of Kalinjar in Bundelkhand. He met death with magnificent courage a few moments after the fortress fell.

SCENE I

WARRIOR

The private tents of the Emperor Humayun. Here a number of noble Mogul LADIES, including the EMPRESS Haji Begum, are cowering together, expecting every moment to be in the hands of Sher Shah's Afghans. Outside, a pitched battle is taking place between the Imperial guards and the attackers; and screams from the women of lesser rank who have been seized and carried off, and to the terror of the empress and her companions.

EMPRESS: I wish that I were dead or had the courage to take my life before the Afghans burst in upon us. (*Wrings her hands*) What shall we do?

AQIQA BEGUM (*a child*): I'm not afraid, I have a little knife; if any soldier touches me, I shall know what to do.

EMPRESS: Hark to that child! I wish I were as brave, but somehow I cannot face my end not knowing whether the Emperor still lives. How horrible, just when we'd thought all safe, a treaty binding as a vow laid on Sher Khan. I will not call him Shah. That such a man

should be a king even in name, sticks in my throat. Our men and his had met as friends. The traitor !

SHAHAM BIBI (*a young wife of Humayun*): Lady, there is a way by which we shall be safe if not from death then from dishonour. I'll plait a little rope from the strands of my hair which, wound tight round a soft throat, will quickly bring sleep from which there's no awaking.

EMPRESS (*fretfully*): Fine talk ! And must I choke to please this Afghan horse-dealer ? There was a time when if he'd breathed my name it would have been the last word he had spoken.

SHAHAM BIBI (*wearily*): The times have changed ; now he is king, and our dear Emperor lost to us. (*Weeps.*)

EMPRESS : Tchut, girl ! how's this for bravery ? I do not weep.

SHAD BIBI (*a spirited Turki maiden*): Queens do not weep, but 'tis permitted to such as we. (*There is a sound of conflict, the clash of swords, shouts, curses and groans from just outside the tents.*) Heaven grant that our protectors hold the entrance. (*Runs to Shaham Bibi and puts an arm round her.*) Dear child, hold close to me. We are as sisters. (*Whispering*) The empress, do not heed her ; she will find some way of living ; and then she's no light weight to haul across the flooded Ganges. But you sweet lovely thing, hold close to me.

SHAHAM BIBI : Yes, we are as sisters, that I know, and I can die holding your hand. But what of Aqiqa ? She is not yet eight years old. Is she to see such things ?

CHAND BIBI (*also a very young girl*): I will keep her. Come here, little sister, put away your knife and lay your head upon my breast. Are my arms safe ? I hoped to hold my son within them, but I would rather he never sees a world if it can be like this.

The din increases and the canvas of the tent bulges as defenders and attackers struggle in the narrow passage. A hand clutching a dagger is thrust right through the cloth. Seeing it the empress screams.

EMPRESS : O ! We are lost.

SHAD BIBI (*sturdily*) : Not yet.

She snatches the little knife from the child Aqiqa, and with one deft cut at the intruding hand, causes it to drop the dagger. There is a groan, but Shad Bibi picks up the dagger and whirls it round her head.

I am armed ! I am armed !

AQIQA (*imperiously*) : Give me back my knife. (*Shad Bibi does so.*) I am armed too. Now, let the Afghans come ! (*She too whirls her little knife round her head.*)

SHAHAM BIBI (*very sadly*) : How terrible war is ! It makes men lower than the animals, and women something nature never intended.

AQIQA (*simply*) : We must be brave whatever happens. All our women are brave, Shaham Bibi.

EMPRESS (*pressing her hands over her ears*) : How you can chatter with death a few feet off I do not know. Help ! help !

She rushes across the tent and presses up against the canvas at the far side, shrouding her face in her veil. As she does so, a group of AFGHANS burst in, though one is dragged back by an AMIR, the last of Humayun's faithful few ; he grapples with his adversary, but the tent is rushed and, with a shout, a soldier picks up Shad Bibi, who, seemingly unresisting, manages to work her dagger round her captor's arm. Aqiqa watches her with a twisted smile on her young face, and fondles her little knife.

SHAD BIBI (*as if yielding*) : Soldier, do not grip me so tight. I shall not struggle.

Droops as if fainting. The soldier relaxes his hold on

her a little ; her arm shoots outwards and back with rapid force.

SOLDIER (*staggering back*): The witch, she's stabbed me ! Catch her, she'll escape. (*Falls and dies.*)

SHAD BIBI : Yes, I'll escape.

Stabs herself and falls in Shaham Bibi's arms.

AQIQA (*shrilly and furiously*): Dogs, you have killed her.

Throws herself against an Afghan, her knife poised to strike. The man seizes her and pinions her arms.

EMPRESS (*desperately*): Allah receive my soul !

She swoons ; Chand Bibi runs to her and kneeling beside her chafes her hands. A soldier thrusts the younger woman aside and is about to raise the empress, when a warning cry from one of his comrades arrests his action.

SOLDIER : The King ! Sher Shah himself approaches.

ANOTHER SOLDIER : Away with the women alive or dead.

He bends over the form of Shad Bibi, but before he can do anything to conceal it, SHER SHAH strides into the tent followed by four of his personal STAFF and the MAULVI.

SHER SHAH (*very sternly*): How's this ? Had you my orders to molest these noble ladies ? (*Moves across the tent to where the empress lies huddled against the canvas.*) Let go that robe, you dog. (*Strikes with the flat of his sword the arm of the Afghan soldier.*) Is it for such as you to touch the garment of a queen ? This is the last you'll look on, for I'll have you blinded so that in perpetual darkness you'll repent on this most shameful deed. Had I but come some moments sooner, this would never have been. Ladies, I crave forgiveness that these rough men, drunken with victory, have caused you fear and shame. But you are safe, you have my word.

SHAHAM BIBI (*with bleak bitterness, and pointing to the still figure of Shad Bibi*): Only she is safe. (Sher Shah follows the accusing finger and starts back as if he had been struck).

SHER SHAH: How did she die?

SOLDIER (*afraid for his life*): Your Majesty, we never touched her.

SHAHAM BIBI (*sternly*): You lie.

SHER SHAH: The truth, or one and all of you shall pay a life apiece.

SOLDIER (*sullenly*): Look, there my brother lies, stabbed through the heart.

SHER SHAH: And well he deserved his end. That I should live to see these things done in my name! (*With sharp command*) Summon the guard, arrest these men who have so far exceeded their duty as to smirch the fair name of Sher Shah.

MAULVI: Would it not be well if we delayed no longer in placing these ladies far from war's alarms?

SHER SHAH: They shall be escorted to our private camp and treated with all courtesy.

AQIQA (*who has been held all this time by one of the soldiers*): I will not go and dance for the new king!

SOLDIER (*who holds her*): Hush! (*Speaks in her ear*) I am no Afghan, though dressed to look like one. I am a faithful servant of the Emperor. He told me to watch over the empress and over you even at the cost of my life. The empress, she is safe. Sher Shah will see to that, or carry a blackened name to the grave. But you, poor child, so young and beautiful, I'll see to it that you escape.

AQIQA (*in a whisper*): Ah! how? As Shaham Bibi escaped?

SOLDIER: Allah forbid! I hid a little boat, and though the Ganges runs bank-high, we may still cross to safety and rejoin the Emperor.

AQIQA : Take me, oh take me away from this bad place and these bad men.

Unnoticed, the SOLDIER slips away with AQIQA through the crowd that press forward in the wake of the guard. The group of Afghans who have violated the privacy of the empress and her ladies are now in custody and quailing under the stern eye of Sher Shah. The empress has recovered and stands supported by Chand Bibi, while the Maulvi tries to reassure her.

MAULVI : Fear nothing, Lady. All will yet be well and you shall be as safe as if you were with your husband.

EMPRESS : Good Maulvi, tell me ; is there news of him ?

MAULVI : He has escaped and crossed the river safely. Sher Shah is as merciful as he is great.

EMPRESS : I thank him and you. Allah is good. But what a night of horror ! Shall I ever forget it ?

MAULVI : It is passed and day will soon dawn.

SHER SHAH (*in a harsh voice*) : Come, clear the tent of all this rabble ; and let not a man of you show his face upon the path these ladies tread. (*To the empress*) Lady, within my camp all honour shall be shown you, as if you were my mother. If I could give my right hand to undo this night's work, I'd gladly do so.

EMPRESS (*sadly*) : Nothing can mend the veil so rudely torn.

HAJI BEGUM moves with bent head towards the entrance of the tent between the guards who stand looking towards the ground. SHER SHAH follows her with his personal STAFF. The MAULVI remains to comfort CHAND BIBI who is weeping wildly. He persuades her to follow the empress. The tent is emptied, except for Shaham Bibi, who has contrived, under the pretence of adjusting her veil, to stay behind.

She flings herself down by the still form of Shad Bibi and kisses her quiet hands.

SHAHAM BIBI: Dearest, are you at peace now, you who were so full of life, so gay and strong? How calm your face, how happy! It must be well with you. Good-bye, sweet friend, good-bye.

(She draws a veil over the dead face, and steals away through another door into the night.)

SCENE II

THE FAITHFUL FRIEND

EPISODE 1

SHER SHAH'S camp in Malwa. The new King of Delhi is sitting in audience and listening to the dispatches which have been brought in by his messenger spies. With him are JILAL KHAN (his second son) and KHOWAS KHAN (his ablest general). There are also present SHUJAA KHAN, the new commandant of the Sivas, and several AMIRS at the moment high in the favour of Sher Shah.

SHER SHAH (in great good humour): Grand tidings these! *(Spreads out a letter on his lap.)* Raja Matter Sin accedes to our demand to give up Bairam Khan. The general is already on his way to pay us homage.

KHOWAS KHAN: Your Majesty, beware of this same Khan. 'Tis not the first time he has bent the knee, the better to kick.

SHER SHAH: You have the true Afghan bluntness, Khan, but be sure I'll master Humayun's late commander-in-chief. I'd rather have him with us than against us, and I do not trust the raja to look after him.

SHUJAA KHAN: I doubt if Your Majesty will ever attach Bairam Khan to your service. I know him well;

a man of iron mould, a great soldier, and faithful to the house of Babur to his last drop of blood.

SHER SHAH (*throwing up his head and sticking out his bearded chin*): We brought in the Khader chief quickly enough, and he showed fight at first.

KHOWAS KHAN: And after paying homage, he escaped, dressed as a slave, and now is laughing to himself in Gujarat.

SHER SHAH: While Shujaa Khan administers his estates. He did not take those with him to Gujarat, Khan.

KHOWAS KHAN (*discontentedly*): No, Your Majesty, but it seems a dangerous game to play, letting these malcontents into the royal camp, from which they escape to spread information of all that they have seen.

SHER SHAH: I cannot watch every mousehole, but rest assured that Bairam Khan shall not escape.

JILAL KHAN (*with a rough laugh*): Well, not alive. Dead men tell no tales.

SHER SHAH: That's true but still, he is a gallant soldier, and I would like to see him in my service. I'd honour him, set him so high that his old master could not raise the bribe. I never shall feel safe with Bairam Khan fighting for Humayun. He's got the brains of fifty of the Mogul leaders. 'Twould not surprise me to find the whole Mogul power crumble away, if Bairam Khan were ours. He, more than any man, helped Babur to conquer Hindustan. Well, he can now help me to smash the last remnants of Rajput power and the stiff-necked Gakker resistance. Upon my word, I'd rather have him than my new throne at Delhi.

KHOWAS KHAN (*with acid jealousy*): And with the rise of Bairam Khan, shall we, your well-tried leaders, take a lower place than this new star?

SHER SHAH (*much amused*): Men are but children after all. There was a time when myself wept for a

dirhem, and a holy man hearing me cried aloud, 'Listen to the Emperor of Hindustan crying for a dirhem!' No, the advent of Bairam Khan will not affect you, or any man who has served me well. He knows these rajas and their country. I want him now, and he comes—that's all. Sher Shah requires him just so long as he is useful.

JILAL KHAN: And are we all to do him honour, load him with gifts and bend the knee?

SHER SHAH: No, I myself will honour him enough for any man; meet him with all distinction, throw round his shoulders my own robe.

KHOWAS KHAN (*aside to Shujaa Khan*): Well to be Bairam Khan! But mark my words, even Sher Shah is not yet great enough to obscure the memory of Babur. If Bairam Khan forgets his pledge, then I'll forget mine and strike a blow.

SHUJAA KHAN: Hush! the Tiger's ears are sharp. *Sher Shah has been, to outward observation, deeply intent on a dispatch while Khowas Khan whispers to Shujaa Khan, but as the former stops abruptly, he raises his head and looks intently at him.*

SHER SHAH: 'Tis as you said, Shujaa Khan, the Tiger's ears are sharp, and so are his claws. It is well to remember that. Amirs, the audience is ended. Allah be with you.

EPISODE 2

Two days later. SHER SHAH is enthroned in the royal pavilion, surrounded by a gorgeous company of AMIRS and Afghan OFFICERS. The royal umbrella flutters over his head; he is dressed magnificently. In front of the dais stand two officers from the court of Raja Matter Sin, and beside them, in the full dress uniform of a Mogul officer of high rank, stands BAIRAM KHAN. He has just arrived from the court of the raja.

SHER SHAH (*affably*): Welcome, Bairam Khan, to this our temporary court.

He rises, and divesting himself of his gorgeous mantle, descends the steps of the dais, and embracing the Mogul general, throws the garment around him.

It is our pleasure thus to honour you and show our joy that you have come amongst us.

BAIRAM KHAN (*courteously and yet coolly*): Your Majesty desired my presence, and I am here. But surely this distinction is much beyond the occasion. What have I done to wear a royal robe? What have I done to deserve a royal embrace?

SHER SHAH (*increasingly flattering*): All Hindustan knows why you should be honoured, Bairam Khan. That true fidelity which has its roots in moral greatness has been well proved by your attachment to that house which you have served so nobly. Such a great stream will never change its course.

BAIRAM KHAN: Your Majesty's observation is just; real attachment will never change.

SHER SHAH (*changing countenance*): Unless, of course, the object of that attachment proves unworthy.

BAIRAM KHAN: Ah! then, a man may act as he thinks best.

SHER SHAH (*with relief*): Good. We understand each other, Khan?

BAIRAM KHAN: Your Majesty, I think so. Time will prove how well.

SHER SHAH (*enthroning himself again, and addressing the company*): Amirs and officers, there comes amongst us a great soldier, one who has never failed in duty to his king. That times have changed is not to say that he has changed. He has no spot or slur upon his loyalty, no breath of treachery sullies his fair name. His sword is bright, his shield untarnished, and we accept him into our service right gladly and do him honour. See

to it, gentlemen, that while he rests within the royal camp he is welcomed as one who is already dear to me. So may we welcome all great men. (*Turns to Bairam Khan, who stands at attention during the King's oration*) Khan, you are tired, you have our permission to retire to the quarters which I trust are not unworthy of you; the best that we could do in a rough camp. Later, I would speak with you alone.

Bairam Khan bows his head in acknowledgement of compliments paid him, and, escorted by his own attendants and others allotted to him by Sher Shah, leaves the royal presence.

EPISODE 3

A week later. BAIRAM KHAN, accompanied by ABULKASIM (a nobleman who had been governor of Gwalior under Humayun) has escaped from the camp of Sher Shah. Worn out by a long and swift ride, they have dismounted in a lonely tract of country on the road to Gujarat. Their horses, also exhausted, are tethered near by. The two men are sharing a frugal meal.

BAIRAM KHAN: By now Sher Shah's men will know our horses were shod backward and that we rode in this direction.

ABULKASIM: 'Tis a trick of his own, but must have baffled the pursuit. We've had a start that, if our horses last, should carry us into safety.

BAIRAM KHAN: Sher Shah has spread a web in all directions, in which his spies watch like great spiders waiting for some poor fly. It was a miracle that we escaped out of the camp—that and your cleverness, Abulkasim. How shall I ever repay you?

ABULKASIM: What would you repay? The debt is mine. To serve you, Bairam Khan, I'd give my life, and that you know.

BAIRAM KHAN : I know you are the truest, bravest man that ever lived, and by yourself a match for every Afghan. Do you think we're safe ?

ABULKASIM : As safe as men may be in these wild times, and safer far than in the camp of that old Tiger, whether he purrs or growls. In fact I think I trust him further when I can see his fangs, than when he crouches, eyes half-shut, waiting for the right moment to spring.

BAIRAM KHAN : The Emperor is no match for him in cunning.

ABULKASIM : Nor yet in tactics. Sher Shah is not a rough-made Afghan, but a man of high ability, long and carefully trained.

BAIRAM KHAN : You're right ; I well remember when, at the court of Babur, he was at a loss how to cut some meat served at the royal table. He had no knife, and cried, not once but twice : ' Give me a tool with which to cut this meat.' The servants smiled, looked down their noses and passed him by, enjoying his discomfiture. Even the amirs stroked their beards, the better to conceal their feelings. He saw it all, and with a scowl, pulled out his dagger and so cut the food. Babur was watching, and then turned to me, saying with pointed meaning, ' The Afghan will go far. He is a man who in every difficulty will see an opportunity '. That night Sher Shah fled from the court. It seems that the Emperor's words were carried to him, and he seeing in them a hint of censure, made himself scarce. No one saw him go. He next appeared leading a powerful army ; you know the rest.

ABULKASIM : I know enough about him to wish to put many miles between him and myself. We should ride on, the night is passing, and by the dawn I'd like another fifty miles between us and the camp.

BAIRAM KHAN : Then we'll mount and make such speed as we can. How quiet it is ! Not a sound, even

of wind in the trees. I think it would be well to muffle the horses' hoofs. (*Springs to his feet, and bends his head forward, listening intently*) Hark! what's that? (*As he speaks, a lone jackal howls mournfully.*)

ABULKASIM: Only a jackal looking for a meal. (*He too has risen to his feet, straining every nerve to catch any fresh sound.*) Allah defend us! 'tis cavalry! I hear the beat of hoofs. (*Dashes towards his horse, which rears and whinnies.*) Peace, fool, would you give away your master's life?

BAIRAM KHAN (*calmly*): He too hears the beat of horses' feet, and only calls to his kind. He has no quarrel with the Afghan. In my opinion it is no use to mount. Our horses are too done to run a race, and our best chance is to stay just where we are.

ABULKASIM (*anxiously*): There is no cover worth considering in this thin scrub. It is not for myself I fear, but for you, Bairam Khan, if we are taken. Sher Shah will be in such an ugly mood that even *your* life will not be worth a moment's purchase.

BAIRAM KHAN: Be comforted, my friend, Sher Shah shall never take Bairam Khan alive.

ABULKASIM: I've an idea; I will ride on alone, clatter over the stones and make as much noise as a mad man might, if he were pursued.

BAIRAM KHAN: Ah, that would be a clever thing! Even the Afghans might wonder that Bairam Khan dispensed with caution while escaping. No, noble friend, if danger comes, then let us face it together. Besides, Sher Shah has no great quarrel with *you*.

ABULKASIM (*grimly*): No, but he soon may have.

BAIRAM KHAN: But listen, I even see how you may come quite well out of this affair.

ABULKASIM (*tranquilly*): And so do I. You will not ride?

BAIRAM KHAN: No. It would be no use. Dear

friend, I'm not afraid to die, but this I would ask, if you should get your liberty, then rejoin our master and tell him Bairam Khan was ever faithful, and died blessing the line sprung from the noble Babur.

ABULKASIM (*much moved*): I cannot live on without you. No man has ever charmed my heart as you have charmed it. Never a friend made such a claim on my loyalty. Let me ride on and draw the pursuit away from this spot. So might you see a way to escape.

BAIRAM KHAN: Speak no more of this, friend. It is too late for us to move one way or another. Look, look, here they come!

Along the road, by the side of which the fugitives have halted, gallop a troop of HORSEMEN. There is no escape for Bairam Khan and Abulkasim for the scrub behind them is too short to conceal them and too sparse for them to crouch down. With daring audacity Bairam Khan leaps with drawn sword into the middle of the road, his figure clearly outlined in the faint light of the moon, now nearly setting. The leader of the pursuit reins in his horse until it rears, and gives a shout of triumph.

BAIRAM KHAN: Halt! in the Emperor's name.

AFGHAN CAPTAIN: Hark how the cock crows! Soon the sun will rise and see you our prisoner, Bairam Khan. Put up your sword, or fifty shall strike it down.

ABULKASIM (*stepping into the moonlight and taking a place beside Bairam Khan*): Captain, forgive my servant, who in his priceless loyalty and his deep love for me endeavoured to take my place. I am Bairam Khan, and will come with you, if you will let him go.

BAIRAM KHAN (*thunderstruck at Abulkasim's ruse to save him*): 'Tis false, it is I whom you seek. And I will show it by not being less noble than he who would have bought my life at the price of his own. I surrender without violence, if you will spare the liberty of this man.

AFGHAN CAPTAIN (*puzzled and angry*): Do I possess all time, that I should listen to these fools wrangling which shall be first to meet with death? (*Turns in his saddle and addresses his escort*) Is there a soldier here who knows the features of this said Bairam Khan? For we've no quarrel with the other, and he can practise his madness in peace.

One of the escorts rides forward and reins up just near where Bairam Khan and Abulkasim are standing with drawn swords. The moon sinks, and there is no light except the very faint approach of dawn.

Kindle a torch, scan well the faces of these two men. I am told that this Khan is a fine man of handsome features.

The torch is kindled, and the man who is supposed to be able to recognize Bairam Khan looks long and doubtfully first at one of the fugitives and then at the other. At last he indicates Abulkasim as being the person wanted.

SOLDIER: It was only a glimpse of the Khan I got at the King's durbar, but there is no man of such a build in Hindustan, or with such noble features.

AFGHAN CAPTAIN: Then seize and secure him. Let the other go free.

Four men dash forward to surround Abulkasim who stands with folded arms, his face, in the flaring torch-light, calm and almost happy. Bairam Khan however repulses the attempt with a desperate thrust at the first man to touch his friend and is overpowered only after wounding three more of his assailants.

ABULKASIM: I beg you, Sir, to let my servant go. Disarm him if you will, but if you take him I'll find a way to defraud you of my capture. Sher Shah will not smile kindly upon a captain who fails to execute so high a mission. Alive, I'm worth a goodly mansab; dead, just nothing—perhaps even a reprimand.

AN AFGHAN OFFICER : The Khan speaks truly. Let the servant go. Disarm him, take the horses.

ABULKASIM : They're both dead lame, or we should have been far away long before this.

AFGHAN CAPTAIN : Then bind the Khan.

ABULKASIM : You need not. I will come quite quietly. (*To Bairam Khan, who is dazed and wounded*) Fear not for me. I shall remember how gladly you would have given your life for mine. Gentlemen, I am ready.

He mounts a horse led forward by one of the escorts, the whole party wheel round, and the two men holding Bairam Khan bind his arms and, releasing him, give him a push which sends him tumbling on his face in the dust. Then, mounting, they fall in with the rest and at the word of command the whole party clatter off.

BAIRAM KHAN (*struggling to his feet*) : Hold ! I am Bairam Khan ! I am Bairam Khan ! You have taken the wrong man ! Allah, come to his aid. Save, I implore you, my beloved friend. Let the earth open. Send down thy thunderbolts !

He tries to attract the attention of the AFGHANS by shouts and cries, and with his arms bound, dust and blood on his face, struggles to follow them. But they do not even look round. Only ABULKASIM turns in his saddle, and by a gesture conveys his farewell. For a few moments Bairam Khan stands gazing after the fast disappearing horsemen, until they are lost in a cloud of dust. Then he lifts his eyes, and working his right hand free from its bonds raises it to heaven.

BAIRAM KHAN : Allah be my witness, if Sher Shah harms so much as a hair of the head of Abulkasim, then shall he and his be blasted for ever. Death, horrible and swift, shall overtake him, his empire crumble into dust, and that of the line of Babur be exalted. My

sword shall not rest in its scabbard, nor my brain from planning and plotting, until these things be.

He falls on his knees, makes the threefold prostration towards the sun, and then drags himself wearily to where the two jaded horses are huddled up against each other. Searching for his wallet, he draws out his water-flagon and drinks deep, washes the blood from his wound, and with a look of grim resolution mounts his horse and, leading the other, rides towards Gujarat.

SCENE III

VICTORY

EPISODE 1

Before the fortress of Kalinjar in Bundelkhand SHER SHAH is attacking, with a powerful army. The raja has held out through a long siege, but by the aid of batteries raised against the fort, mines run and approaches made, Sher Shah has now brought his works close enough to attempt an assault. He, as usual, is personally directing operations, and oblivious to a heavy cannonade, has taken up a position close under the walls. He is attended by Amirs FATEH KHAN and HAIBAT KHAN, the MAULVI, some FAKIRS and OFFICERS. The group is intent upon the fusing of a mine by the chief sapper.

SHER SHAH: Ha! now you have it. That should shatter the first wall enough to cause a breach, and then a well-aimed rocket will clear it.

FATEH KHAN: Blessed be gunpowder! What else could storm these walls or shake their firmness? What human bravery scale them?

SHER SHAH: In the past, courage has done everything. But I grant you that this fort, like Gwalior, is

stern. That's why I want it. I can't have these rajas perching like crows and dropping things upon us.

HAIBAT KHAN (*gazing at the impregnable walls of the fort*): But they can build, these Hindu masons.

SHER SHAH: Right well I know it, and what it cost me to finish Rohtas. Obstinate fellows too. When first I thought of building the castle, I sent for Toder Khetri and said to him: 'Set me up a fort stronger than anything in Hindustan. Take all the money you require, pay well, but get it done.' He went, but soon returned saying, 'Majesty, these dogs of Gakkers will not set one stone upon another in your name!' I looked at him, then said: 'Did I not select you from among many to do this work? I thought you a man of sense and experience. You have been supplied with money. Go on at any expense. Draw on my treasury for any amount and keep your difficulties to yourself.' He went away. The next I heard was that he had promised a golden coin to every cooly who brought a stone! Soon, there were stones in plenty, and the rate came down through competition! Rohtas was built, and Toder Khetri rose high in my favour. Yes, I was pleased with Rohtas, and when this fortress falls, I shall be well supplied with vantage points, and practice the pouring of boiling oil upon all those below, as the raja and his fellows have on us. Some of our men have suffered badly. A nasty habit I must say—

HAIBAT KHAN (*smiling grimly*): In others—

SHER SHAH: Exactly. Bad habits always belong to other people, not oneself. I've no doubt the raja thinks this one of ours, in laying mines under his foothold, is very wicked, but I fear it must be done. Officer, are you ready?

HEAD SAPPER: Nearly, Your Majesty. Be good enough to stand back, and all the company, or you may be hit by falling stones.

SHER SHAH : Bah ! what's a stone when you're used to boiling oil ? And what's a life anyway ? I'd give mine to take the fort.

MAULVI (*reprovingly*) : Beware of levity, Your Majesty. At times of peril even kings should mute their tongues.

SHER SHAH : Your pardon, Maulvi, but between you and me, I'm tired of strife. This is the last attack that I shall make. I'm grown too old for adventure. Power came too late. Not as with Babur, who when a boy juggled with kingdoms and saw the fruit of his ambition before he'd finished with the prime of manhood. Long have I struggled, plotted, planned, and suffered. Rewards have come too late.

FATEH KHAN : Nay, Your Majesty. You are a great king.

SHER SHAH : And an old man. Do you remember the hag at Delhi who cried out at me as I rode through the streets of my new capital, and when I made my horse caper and curvet, to show her that I still had spirit in me, she shouted, ' Well, if he be an old one, he's a game one ' ?

MAULVI : Is it right we should jest to the sound of cannon ?

SHER SHAH : What else should we do, holy Sir ? Sit down and weep like women, our heads between our knees ? No, if we must die, we'll die like men.

There is a whistling, tearing sound, as a rocket whirls through the air and strikes the fortress wall. Failing to explode, it rebounds into a small powder-magazine, just near where Sher Shah and his staff are standing. There is a terrific explosion, followed by shouts and groans. The magazine has been fired, and many of the groups are terribly injured. Sher falls, rises, and then staggers and falls again.

FATEH KHAN (*who is only slightly burned*): The King, the King! I fear he's badly injured.

Sher Shah is immediately surrounded by an anxious group. He is lying on his side but turns over to display a face distorted with agony, yet, when he speaks, his voice is clear and firm.

SHER SHAH: Yes, I am hurt. But not a word to the troops. 'Tis all-important that they should not hear of this until the fortress falls.

He staggers to his feet and drags himself, stifling his groans, to the trenches where the sappers are working.

That is well, my men, push up the mines until you've reached the very base of the walls. Your king will know how to reward you when your work is done.

SOLDIER: Majesty, you are hurt?

SHER SHAH: A trifle, 'twill be well by sunset.

EPISODE 2

SHER SHAH, although scarcely able to stand, has continued to encourage and direct his men, and has remained with them as fresh storming parties come up. By midday he has grown so weak that he is obliged to recline, which he does under cover of some sandbags, almost under the walls of the fortress. FATEH KHAN and HAIBAT KHAN remain with him, and the MAULVI remains in constant prayer at the side of the wounded king.

FATEH KHAN: Your Majesty, let us carry you away to your tent. There it will be quiet and cool.

SHER SHAH (*faintly*): I will go there when the fortress falls. You shall do with me what you will then, friends.

HAIBAT KHAN: But who can tell when the fortress will fall? You are suffering, Your Majesty. Let's do what we can to ease your pain.

SHER SHAH (*a little wildly*): Only God can do that. Let me be. I can bear what is given me to bear. I must stay here. The soldiers need me. If they missed my voice all might be lost. (*Cries out in a clear voice as there is a thunder of feet up to the walls*) Well done, well done, soldiers of the king! On! On! Victory will be yours by the time of evening prayer. (*He sinks back and wanders a little in his speech.*) This Bairam Khan, he knows the rajas, them and their tricks of boiling oil. He knows the way to treat them. Bring him in. Bring him in, I say, for I have much to ask him. See, here is my robe (*plucks at the sacking spread over him*). I myself will throw it round his shoulders. What's that? 'Real attachment can never change' and you are Babur's man. Stuff! I will give you all Bengal if you'll be mine. (*Sits up and stares with unseeing eyes*) Abulkasim! Well! what of him! He's dead, I tell you. Take your hand from my throat, you're choking me! Can I bring dead men back? You tricked me, Khan, broke your parole, sent Abulkasim in your place. He would not tell me how to trap you, so he died, he died.

A terrific bombardment seems to shake Sher Shah out of his delirium. A physician has been brought, and administers a strong cordial. Just before sunset, a gleam of which penetrates under the rough canopy that has been erected over the king, there is another tremendous bombardment. As the roar of cannon dies away, the call to evening prayers can be heard. A messenger rushes to the place where Sher Shah is lying.

MESSENGER: Majesty! Majesty! The fort has fallen.

SHER SHAH (*in a strong voice*): Thanks be to Almighty God! (*Falls back and dies.*)

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF SHIVAJI

Shivaji the Maratha was born in 1627 at Shivner, a hill fort north of Poona. He was brought up by his mother Jijibai, to whom he was very devoted.

At an early age, Shivaji embarked upon a life of adventure. He gathered round him the Mawalis, a race of hillmen of the Western Ghats, and with their help captured fort after fort until he could almost consider himself master of the Deccan.

The Emperor Aurangzeb, alarmed by Shivaji's success, dispatched his most distinguished general Raja Jai Singh, to deal with the bold Maratha. Jai Singh by his diplomatic methods persuaded Shivaji to surrender to Aurangzeb's authority. In 1665 Shivaji went to court and was received by Aurangzeb, but not with the honour he expected. At a public audience, Shivaji considered himself slighted, and behaved so badly that he was imprisoned by the order of the Emperor. His escape and his return to his mother, after many hair-breadth adventures, is one of the most exciting chapters in the history of India.

SCENE I

THE ESCAPE FROM AGRA

EPISODE 1

In a room of a house outside the city walls of Agra, SHIVAJI the Maratha is sitting on the edge of a charpoy. He wears a coat of cotton and tight trousers of the same material. Round his shoulders, a light muslim scarf hangs loosely. He is bare-headed, his turban lying beside him. Standing in front of him is SAMBHAJI, his son, a young boy. In contrast to his

father's simple dress, Sambhaji is decked out to look a Muslim Omrah (noble). He wears a fullskirted coat, high feathered turban, and tight silken trousers. At his side he carries a fine curved sword in a jewelled scabbard. In the corner of the room stand six large fruit baskets. Their lids are turned back.

SHIVAJI (speaking bitterly): And so, my son, you wear a Muslim coat! Who knows but that it covers a Muslim heart? Of all the insults Aurangzeb has heaped upon me, this is worst, to trick you out as if you were some slave, some puppet born for his amusement. And you! are you not ashamed?

SAMBHAJI: Father, I did not wish to wear these things. My own were dirty, I could not appear before the princess, so they sent me these and bade me put them on. My own they took away, to wash or burn.

SHIVAJI: And yet those travel-worn things were clean compared to these you wear. What is a little honest dirt if the heart is pure?

Sambhaji hides his face against his sleeve; his shoulders shake.

Well may you weep. The times are bad for those who came with me to Agra. And yet, my hopes were high, for Jai Singh told me great honours awaited me. (Laughs harshly) Honours! What have I got in return for my gifts of gold and silver but a prison? I was not good enough for those at court, 'twas easy to forget the promises made on a battlefield. I was to be Lord of the Deccan, was I? The equal of Bijapur, with a crown and a throne of my own! Poor fool that I was, I believed it, and journeyed to Agra to offer my sword. They took it away, but you have one of Turkish fashion, my son; and I should be glad, I suppose, I a free-born Maratha, to see you tricked out like a slave!

SAMBHAJI (wrenching at the fastening of his sword): You can have it, (pants with excitement and effort) and

kill them, or kill me (*tears at his coat*), kill me who forgot—

SHIVAJI (*gently*): Yes—

SAMBHAJI: The great forts that you won, my mother who loves me, country, the smoke of the fires by which the women sing the old Maratha songs, who forgot you who freed us. Ah, kill me (*falls on his knees*), Father, Shivaji, Maharaj.

SHIVAJI (*raising Sambhaji and embracing him*): No, you shall not die, but live to serve the things we love. The great goddess Bhawani, to whom your mother prayed that she might bring forth a son, she will protect us and bring us safely home.

SAMBHAJI (*incredulously*): Home? That is far away. Around this house a double guard watches night and day.

Enter HIRAJI, Shivaji's brother-in-law. He is a small wiry man, not unlike Shivaji, but dressed in the uniform of a Maratha officer.

HIRAJI (*looking at Sambhaji, who is now standing by his father*): Who is this gentleman! 'Tis clear he's from the court. What is the news, my lord? How many caps has the Emperor Aurangzeb sold in the bazaar to-day?

SHIVAJI: Don't tease him, Hiraji. He likes his clothes as little as we do. See how they've hung the boy with jewels! (*Touches a great ear-ring which Sambhaji wears*) Why, this alone would buy a village, and this (*lifts a chain*) feed my army for a month.

HIRAJI: Then take them, they will give him others, won't they, Sambhaji? You're such a favourite with the princess, such a little dear, a pretty boy when nicely dressed. Bah! How I hate these Moguls! There was a day when one of them, the soldier Babur, was worth the lot. A soldier and a man of talent. But now—(*walks over to the baskets*). What? No fruit or sweets today?

Have you grown tired, brother, of feeding priests and beggars ?

SHIVAJI : No, for to-night three pairs of baskets will go out. (*Smiles*) One pair will be so heavy that double pay must be given to the bearers, even a gold piece each.

HIRAJI : A special offering ?

SHIVAJI : Yes, a special offering. (*Hiraji walks over to where Shivaji has again sat down upon the charpoy.*) Brother, to-night I plan to escape, taking Sambhaji with me. Just before sunset there will go out of this room two baskets, then two more, and after those two more.

HIRAJI : I see, and if the guards should enter here, and find the raja vanished, will those three pairs of baskets continue on their way ?

SHIVAJI (*slowly*) : If there were someone who would lie down on my bed—

HIRAJI : There is someone—

SHIVAJI : Thank you, a true Maratha speaks. If I am taken, then, brother, see that Sambhaji is not blamed for my escape. He is not of strong fibre. His mother, only a child when he was born, weeps for him. Try to save him. He has a friend at court, the Emperor's daughter. She will protect him.

HIRAJI : I will do all I can. 'Tis given out that you rave with fever. I've spoken to the guards, bidding them keep their laughter for some more fitting time. The Emperor smiles, sitting like some old vulture, waiting for its prey. Long may he hunger !

SHIVAJI (*with a gesture of nervous impatience*) : Oh, for a horse under me, and the road to Poona clear in front of me !

HIRAJI : Soon, it will be clear. And now, shall I be Shivaji just for an hour or two ? It is the only claim I shall ever lay to fame. In the dim future someone may say, 'And who was the man that took Shivaji's place ?' And then a pause, some doubt, while a pundit

turns a scroll. 'Hiraji'. 'And did he die?' Let us see.
(*He makes the motion of handling an old manuscript.*)

SHIVAJI: You carry the jest too far. They have no quarrel with you at the palace.

HIRAJI: They may have yet. Who knows? Sambhaji, my little Amir, will your master cut my head off when he finds the mountain rat has slipped out of the trap.

SAMBHAJI (*nervously*): Must we lie down inside the baskets?

HIRAJI: Yes, of course; no jumping up and down! Lie still as lizards.

SHIVAJI: The time draws near, the guard will soon be round.

HIRAJI: I'll see you into your baskets, then I'll rest and pull the quilt well over my sleepy head. But, Raja, I shall want a token; give me your bracelet; on my arm it will deceive the sharpest eye unless they peep beneath the quilt, and then I'll bite them.

SHIVAJI (*with a wry smile*): Good-bye, and if I'm caught, remember. (*Crosses the room with Sambhaji.*) Now, in you get, lie close! See, pull the leaves well over you, now these roses. (*Throws in a handful of flowers and some leaves, then shudders*) It is like decorating a bier.

HIRAJI (*cheerfully*): Nay, a bridegroom! (*Throws in more fruit and flowers*) Well, that's enough. Now for the lid. (*He places it over the basket*) Can you breathe, nephew?

SAMBHAJI (*faintly*): Yes, but it's very dark.

HIRAJI: Then go to sleep, and wake up in the morning far away from Agra. (*To Shivaji*) The boy is weak.

SHIVAJI: Well, I know it, but so dear. Why is it, Hiraji, the strong have so few friends?

HIRAJI: They do not need them, that is why. Hark, there's the guard. Raja, your basket.

Shivaji clambers in ; Hiraji heaps in fruit, flowers and leaves, and rams down the lid. Then he bounds on to the charpoy, pulls the quilt over his head, stretches out his arm with Shivaji's bracelet shining on it and groans very faintly. A few minutes afterwards, two GUARDS come in, followed by some COOLIES.

1ST GUARD (to coolies): There are the baskets, six in all. Take them away, make little noise, a sick man lies upon the bed.

2ND GUARD: Then all his offerings were of little use.

1ST GUARD: We all must die. (*Watches the coolies, who are lifting up the baskets on the poles swung on their shoulders*) Faster there.

HEAD COOLIE: The baskets weigh much heavier than other days.

2ND GUARD: A man about to die is generous. Out with you!

The COOLIES march out with the basket. The guards stand for a moment looking at the bed.

2ND GUARD: How still he lies! Almost as one already dead. (*Moves uneasily away from the charpoy*) Look at his arm.

1ST GUARD: Look at his bracelet. Shivaji's bracelet! It is of gold, and hangs loosely enough. If he is dead when we come back—(*stares at the outstretched arm and the bracelet*).

2ND GUARD: Come away. He who robs the dead is cursed. Rewards will not be lacking when the Emperor learns that the Maratha lives no longer.

THE GUARDS creep out, looking fearfully over their shoulders at the still form, under the quilt. A gun is fired from the fort, followed by the muezzin's call to prayer.

EPISODE 2

The afternoon of the next day. Like a ghost HIRAJI rises from beneath the quilt. He straightens his clothes, assumes his military turban, gives his beard and whiskers a rakish curl, and laughs long and quietly to himself.

HIRAJI: Not so dead! Were the guards bribed as richly as the basket bearers, I wonder? Anyway, by now the raja and his son should have got well away. *(He gets up, strolls out of the door and admonishes the guards, who are talking together)* Hist! Make less noise. Shivaji Raja sleeps.

SCENE II

THE RETURN

A room in Shivaji's residence in the mountain fort of Rajgarh near Poona. JIJIBAI, his mother, who has been acting as regent during her son's absence, is seated on a small throne surrounded by OFFICERS of the court, among them the MANTRI (or Chronicler), the SACHIV (or Superintendent of Letters), and the PANDIT RAO (or Religious Head). On the right of Jijibai the poet RAMDAS, Shivaji's guru and companion, sits with an open letter on his knee. In a corner as if to escape notice, crouches SOYABAI, Shivaji's wife and Sambhaji's mother. She is plainly dressed, and wears no jewels. By her, sits Sambhaji's FOSTER-MOTHER, an older woman. She holds Soyabai's hand and whispers to her at intervals.

JIJIBAI: I will not listen to anyone who says that Shivaji is dead. I should be first to know. I who nursed him, who acted as father and mother both. 'There

would be a sign to tell me that he no longer lived. The letter is false.

RAMDAS (*gently*): The Sachiv thinks that it may be genuine; without a doubt it comes from Agra.

JIJIBAI: Then it is surely false. Did Aurangzeb ever tell the truth when a lie would serve? He tricked my son to Agra, lured him by false promises.

RAMDAS (*still mildly*): Not so, it was the Rajput Jai Singh who made the promises. The Emperor is too cautious to offer a reward before the service is rendered.

MANTRI: Affairs look dark, unless news comes soon. Bijapur is moving, discontent among our men may flash out into open mutiny. Everywhere Aurangzeb has spread nets, and still Shivaji tarries—not at Agra—not here. Where is he then?

SACHIV (*sadly*): This letter speaks of death, but not the manner in which he met his end.

SOYABAI (*starting up and clasping her hands*): Tell me, does the letter speak of Sambhaji, my son?

JIJIBAI (*sternly*): Peace girl! Are you the only mother? I tell you, gentlemen, Shivaji will return. I know not when, or how. I shall live on to bless him once again. (*Turning towards the Mantri*) And what is this? The men are restless? Then raise their pay, distribute extra rations, send the wives gifts, the children sweets and playthings. Let the cost rest upon my private purse, but distribute in the name of the raja.

MANTRI: Rani, your words are wise, but if the soldiers ask, 'Where is the raja?' what shall we answer?

JIJIBAI: What shall you say? That at Benares the raja tarries, fulfilling the sacred rites. Spread it abroad that a horoscope has been cast for Shivaji, in which he is crowned Sovereign Lord of Maharashtra; that even now he prepares; and be sure to give presents to every holy man that comes to the gates. Let every bowl be

full to over-flowing, and refuse none admittance. Keep the priests and the soldiers content, not a word of death except in our hearts, where a whisper of fear creeps in as the days go by. (*Her voice sinks, and she herself seems to shrivel up and become very old*) My eyes are dim, I cannot see very far. Supposing Shivaji should come, and I not be here to welcome him! (*Throws out her arms wildly*) Keep me alive, friends, keep me alive with hope. Speak not of death for him.

RAMDAS: I who have loved him more than a father loves a son can feel for you, but who can bribe destiny? We can only wait and pray.

JIJIBAI: Pray? You are right. I have neglected my prayers. To-morrow I will take offerings to the family goddess, and ask her favour for my son, even as I asked, so many years gone by, that I should have a son. Soyabai, come to me. I spoke sharply to you, child. Fret not for Sambhaji. He will return to you.

A slight commotion outside in the courtyard below attracts the attention of those present.

SACHIV: Who comes? Perhaps it is a deputation.

MANTRI: Or an embassy from Bijapur.

RAMDAS: There was no sound of horses' hoofs or challenge. Men of peace come here.

An ATTENDANT enters, a tall Maratha, dressed resplendently in a scarlet coat, and wearing a badge of office. He salaams three times to Jijibai.

ATTENDANT: Rani Saheb, three holy men wait at the outer gate.

JIJIBAI: Whom do they come to see?

ATTENDANT: Your noble self, the Queen Regent.

JIJIBAI: From what country do they come?

ATTENDANT: They are men from the north. They call themselves Bairagis.

JIJIBAI: What is their business?

ATTENDANT (*with a slight sneer*): To beg, Rani

Saheb ; they are all poor men, dusty and ragged, their heads smeared white with ashes. They wear no beards, their heads are shaved.

JIJIBAI : Religious mendicants, came from a far-off place to beg of me ?

RAMDAS : Perhaps to bless, lady.

JIJIBAI : Ah yes, a blessing would not come amiss just now.

MANTRI : Beware ! These men may carry daggers.

JIJIBAI : And would they stab a poor old woman ?

PANDIT RAO : Or risk their lives in Rajgarh fort ?

JIJIBAI : Let them come in. Speak kindly to them. Have I not said all priests and beggars shall be fed and welcomed ?

The ATTENDANT salaams three times again, and goes out. Soyabai edges her way near to the throne until she is just behind it on the left. She has drawn Sambhaji's foster-mother with her. The two women watch the door with wide eyes.

SACHIV : Have I leave to depart, Rani Saheb ? My writer waits for me.

JIJIBAI : Stay just a little longer. Who shall say what news these men may bring ? 'From the north,' Narayan said. Perhaps they have tidings ; how my old heart beats !

She peers at the door, through which the ATTENDANT again appears, ushering in THREE ASCETICS. They are dressed in faded robes of yellow, stained and torn. Their faces are white with ashes, and the smallest of the three keeps his eyes down as if in great humility.

RAMDAS (*rising and carrying his folded hands to his forehead in salutation*) : Greeting, brothers.

1ST ASCETIC : Greeting, most holy guru.

2ND ASCETIC : Peace be on this house !

The third ascetic does not speak, but carries his folded

hands to his ashen face and keeps his eyes bent to the ground.

JIJIBAI: Have you no words with which to bless us, holy man?

1ST ASCETIC (*hurriedly*): Our brother has taken a vow of silence. He works out a penance for a sin committed long ago.

RAMDAS: How many of us should be silent for the same reason!

1ST ASCETIC: We have walked far, lady, hearing of your piety, your many gifts to holy men, and your offerings to the gods.

JIJIBAI (*astonished*): I did not know that so much good was said of me abroad.

2ND ASCETIC: At Puri, where we worshipped Jagannath, we met a Brahman who told us of your many pious acts, and how you ruled by love and not by fear, in your son's absence. Raja Shivaji, we were told, was away at Agra, called by the Emperor on some high affair of state.

JIJIBAI (*earnestly*): Was that the last you heard of him, the raja?

2ND ASCETIC: News came that he was fallen from the Emperor's favour. 'Twas but a tale, and then that he was cast in prison. We met a band of Shivaji's horsemen who said that they were on the road to Poona, for the raja had sent them back to their homes.

JIJIBAI: He feared for them, left to the wrath of Aurangzeb, if he himself escaped. Come, tell us more, if more you know.

1ST ASCETIC: We do not. Being men of peace, averse to war, we hear so little of the world of princes. We go our way, seeking a shrine at which to ask forgiveness for sins of an earlier birth. All this short life is taken up atoning for sins long past.

JIJIBAI: As what is left of mine should be spent in

good acts. Come, bless me. I am sad, and not at all resigned. Let your quiet spirits lead mine to peace.

The first ascetic blesses her in the accepted manner, and then the second follows his companion's example.

JIJIBAI (*peering at the third ascetic*): You are silent, give me a sign.

He falls at her feet, then raises his head and lays it on her lap. She passes trembling hands over his face, then gives a cry and draws his head to her breast.

JIJIBAI: He has come back, my son, my loved one! He whom I rocked on my knee has come back. He whom I armed with a sword with which to carve out a ladder to fame, he has come back! Shivaji! Shivaji!

ALL: SHIVAJI! SHIVAJI!

SHIVAJI (*rising from his kneeling posture, and standing with his hand on his mother's shoulder*): Yes, it is I, Shivaji, safe from the fox's den; safe from the vulture's claws.

SOYABAI (*very faintly*): Husband, where is our son?

SHIVAJI: Safe, and with friends, but hidden away from the wiles and the web of that spider at Agra. (*Turns to Soyabai*) Poor little Queen, without son, without husband! Child, you are thin. (*Soyabai smiles, blushes and draws her sari across her face. Shivaji looks round and sees Ramdas*) Ah, my dear master, here is the truant returned, here is your pupil ready to listen to wisdom. Moro Pant, I'll be ready to-morrow to plan with you; Niloji, if they had you at Agra, I would never hope high. Why, Annaji, do you stand back? Come all of you near. I feel like a boy out of school. To-day we will feast all the poor. They shall shout, they shall sing in the streets, 'The raja returns, all is well'. Let torches be lit on the hills, and the lamps in the palace blaze out. Fire the guns, make a noise, for the king has come back to his people (*speaks very simply*), the son to his mother.

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